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FM AMCONSUL JEDDAH

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1565

INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE

RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE

RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 8549

RUEHDH/AMCONSUL DHAHRAN 0138

RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC

RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

RUCNNTA/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0108

RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000391

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/FO, EEB/ESC, DRL, R, NEA/PPD;
DEPARTMENT PLS PASS TO USTR FOR CHRIS WILSON;
USDOC PASS TO RIYADH, JEDDAH, DHAHRAN;
TREASURY DEPT FOR SECRETARY GEITHNER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/16/2019

TAGS: ECON ETRD KWMN PGOV SOCI SA

SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS CONSERVATIVES, TRIBAL MEMBERS, AND ONE FEMALE INCUMBENT WIN JEDDAH CHAMBER OF COMMERCE ELECTIONS AMID PRESS REPORTS OF VOTE BUYING

REF: A. JEDDAH 0381

1B. JEDDAH 0297

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Classified By: Consul General Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

¶1. (C) Religious conservatives, tribal members, and alleged vote-buyers won seats on the board of directors of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) -- a progressive, independent power center in Saudi Arabia's commercial capital -- in a hotly contested, intensely covered election characterized by record turnout and widespread reports of corruption and fights. Only one woman was elected, incumbent Lama Sulaiman, who received the second-highest number of votes among the 12 winners. The Minister of Commerce and Industry, Abdullah Zainal Alireza, is expected to announce his six appointees to the 18-member board within the next few days. Female candidates believe the minister will appoint only as many women as were elected to the board (i.e., one). Newspapers reported that some candidates had called on the Ministry to invalidate the election results because of fraud, but the Ministry rebuffed their request, saying the elections were fair. Reformist candidates expressed frustration and disillusionment with the electoral process, which appears to have benefited well-organized Islamists determined to roll back the gains made by women under the JCCI board elected in ¶2005. It is unclear whether the intense media coverage of both the positive and negative aspects of the JCCI elections signals greater press freedom, or was simply allowed because it showed the disadvantages of elections and did not cross any red lines. But the results of the "one voter, one vote" system in an election the wealthiest and more progressive merchant families opted not to contest suggest the risks attending the election process in Saudi Arabia. End summary and comment.

Islamist majority determined to send women back home

¶2. (C) Consulate contacts and Saudi media reported that seven newcomers and five incumbents won the 12 elected seats on the JCCI board. The new board appears to be dominated by Islamic-hardliners committed to rolling back the gains made by women during the past four years. Only two clear supporters of women's participation in the economy were elected, Abdullah Dahlan (a former JCCI chairman and Shura Council member) and incumbent Lama Sulaiman (the only woman elected). The progressive JCCI board chosen in 2005, which was elected as a 12-member slate headed by Jeddah's wealthiest families, allowed women to work alongside men at the JCCI building (a breakthrough in Saudi Arabia, which strictly segregates the sexes) and challenged laws, regulations, and customs discriminating against women. In the run-up to the election, hard-line candidates refused to attend official meetings with the female contenders, and seem unlikely to allow mixed-gender board meetings.

Al-Watan Arabic daily newspaper and consulate contacts reported the following results:

Traders: Essam Naas, 282 votes; Mohamed Habib Khojah, 278 votes; Ziad Bassam, 258 votes; Bassam Akhdar, 234 votes; Dr. Abdullah Dahlan, 185 votes; Zuhair Al-Marhoumi, 135 votes.

Industrialists: Saleem al Harbi, 567 votes; Lama Sulaiman, 557 votes; Abdullah Mared Bin Mahfouz, 496 votes; Mazen Batterjee, 435 votes; Ahmed Al Murabaei, 389 votes; Sheikh Abdulkhalek Saeed, 302 votes.

Septel with biographic information on the new JCCI board will follow.

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"Unfair elections, unfair competition"

¶3. (C) Several candidates contacted by the Consulate expressed frustration and disillusionment with the electoral process, saying they observed other candidates offering money for votes. Some female candidates told us that the small business owners that had earlier promised to vote for them were offered money (between 2,000-3,000 SR, or \$500-\$750) by male candidates and changed their votes after the women refused to pay more. Female candidates maintained they had little chance of winning since they were honest and did not bribe voters. Local press ran articles about campaign corruption, including photographs of a candidate paying an eligible voter and an SMS message offering to buy votes. The media also reported (and contacts confirmed) altercations between official election observers and candidates whose complaints about repeat voters were ignored. According to multiple sources, fights broke out at the polls between the sons of two prominent candidates (Essam Naas and Abdullah Dahlan) after Dahlan's sons accused the other side of distributing money to voters. Besides cash, candidates offered a variety of other inducements to voters, including lavish buffets in air-conditioned tents outside the polls.

Disillusion with democracy?

¶4. (C) Comment. The intense and frank press coverage of the JCCI board election -- among the most open coverage post has witnessed -- could be interpreted as a sign of greater press freedom. Alternatively, the media coverage may have been allowed or encouraged in order to showcase the negative aspects of elections and democracy. The defeated progressive candidates, especially the women, may have emerged from the campaign disillusioned with the democratic process. More worrisome, the decisions by Jeddah's wealthiest families to sit out the election rather than risk defeat in the "one voter, one vote" (anti-bloc, divide-and-conquer) system

instituted by Commerce Minister Alireza for this election, opened the field for well-organized Islamists and ambitious individuals willing to play political hardball to take over an institution that has served as a beacon for progress in Saudi Arabia and alternative power center. End comment.
QUINN